Whatever Happened to Conversion?
John 3:1-15
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There are two ideas that are notoriously hard to sell in the contemporary church: One, the notion that there is something wrong with humanity, corporately, and each of us individually: that it is responsible for evil and injustice historically, and unhappiness and estrangement, personally: the idea, that is to say, of Sin; Two, the notion that salvation is a gift of God and not the prize given for many accomplishments on the day of our graduation: the idea, that is to say, of Grace. The difficulty we experience with those two ideas, plus the fact that we live two thousand years in time away from those people who first decided to follow Jesus Christ is what has happened to conversion.

Two weeks ago we began to look at the topic through the experience of Simon Peter. I suggested that Peter became a new man when, after the resurrection, he looked honestly at his own failures and the miracle of Christ's love which was not, apparently, effected by those failures. I suggested that Jesus saw more in Peter than Peter even dared see in himself and that his rebirth was, in part, his catching this new and bigger vision of himself.

Next Sunday I hope to trace the experience of another person in the Gospels, the fascinating story of Mary of Magdala, known as Mary Magdalene. This morning I invite you to consider the case of an intriguing old man, Nicodemus by name.

The incident recorded in the third chapter of the Gospel according to John is actually the first of three appearances by Nicodemus in the record. His was a remarkable pilgrimage. Later he would defend Jesus in the Sanhedrin. And after the crucifixion he would accompany Joseph of Arimathea in claiming the body and providing an appropriate burial. He was an altogether admirable man.

His interest in Jesus of Nazareth began early. One time he came to Jesus at night, apparently to avoid being seen. He wanted to talk: Jesus told him that if he was looking for the Kingdom of God he would have to be "born anew". Now that, frankly, perplexed the old man. He was, after all, a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin. He was, that is, a good man; honest, generous, fair. His life was ordered by the Holy Law of Moses. His style was set: even if he wanted to, he didn't know if he could become a new person. And obviously it was ridiculous for an old man to consider the possibility of actual, physical rebirth. Nicodemus wanted to know two things: Why it was necessary for him to be born anew, and How it was possible: the same questions which we would ask were we in that situation.

Let's begin with the "why?", at the point where we seem to have the most consistent difficulty. The Gospel of Jesus Christ begins, philosophically, on the premise that there is something radically wrong with the human condition: that the instincts for survival, preservation and self-enhancement which are so healthy and necessary a part of the animal kingdom become, in the human community, selfishness, greed and violence. The New Testament calls it Sin, with a capital S, and suggests that to be human is to be afflicted by it. The Protestant Reformers wrote a lot about it. Luther taught that the human heart "curves in upon itself". John Calvin submitted that everything we do, even good things, are tainted by self interest and pride. In the 1920's Walter Lippman in his very popular, A Preface to Morals, scandalized that very optimistic generation by doubting that "natural" humanity was capable of moral behavior. He wrote, "...the unregenerate man can only muddle into muddle." And Dr. Karl Menninger, even more recently, suggested that the healthiest thing we could do for Western Civilization would be to reintroduce it to the old Christian idea of original sin.

There is, admittedly, a very fine line between the honest confrontation of the human condition, and a grim and manipulative concentration on what St. Paul called our "lower nature". Too frequently, the church has ended up on the wrong side of the line, convicting people for their sinfulness, making people feel bad about themselves, loading guilt upon guilt. But even though that is true, I would submit that the church which ignores the idea of sin, and restricts its Gospel to the power of positive thinking and the potential of the human personality does you no favor at all. Everyone who is honest knows what Paul meant when he confessed: "The good I would do, I leave undone: that which I would not do, I do: there is no health in me." Everyone knows how selfishness can hurt others - even when we don't intend it: how easy it is, for instance, to be isolated by the walls of our own egos, even from those we want and need and to end up estranged from the very persons we deeply love.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ begins on the premise that we are separated from our true identity: that in Jesus Christ God has done something to set things right: that we are invited - as was the case with a son who strayed to a far country - to come to our senses, turn around, return home, and be reunited with our father, our brothers and sisters and our true selves.

That idea, I said earlier, is hard to sell. But social scientists, particularly psychiatrists and psychologists, do not discount it. I included on the bulletin cover a small quote from a scholarly essay on Sigmund Freud about the significance of a change that makes people see things in a difficult way. The late David Roberts, whose book on the relationship between psychology and religion is still required reading for theological students, observed in a good, but difficult sentiment,"Since the obstacles to ethical and religious insight are not merely intellectual, but include those emotional conflicts which prevent a person from living the truth that he sees, they can be removed only by dynamic transformation of the whole self and the center of motivation." (Psychotherapy and a Christian View of Man, p.68).

Nicodemus would have wondered, as we do, why it was necessary to talk about rebirth and conversion. The answer of the New Testament to that question is, simply, the reality of sin. Conversion, in the New Testament idiom, is the turning of the self to God so that Jesus Christ becomes Lord: He becomes judge and companion and motivator. His will, not self interest, becomes the behavioral standard by which we live: His love and forgiveness become the new experience of grace out of which we are enabled to live a new life. We may not be altogether comfortable with that, but one thing is clear, the New Testament makes no sense whatever without it.

The lingering and real problem, I have always felt, however, is not what the New Testament teaches but the stereotyped definition of conversion - which is so very popular in our culture. The very words "conversion" and "rebirth" as they are currently used, are embarassing to Presbyterians. If I were asked if I am a Christian, my answer would be "yes". If, on the other hand, someone asks if I am born again I'm likely to change the subject. It does not ordinarily occur to us that the two are one and the same: that to be a Christian is to be involved in a process of becoming that may be described as new birth. Of course, people who ask don't know what we mean by "process" either. Evangelism, unfortunately, has come to be the sole property of the salesmen and manipulators who would market Jesus Christ like soap powder to the end of creating something called a "conversion experience"; in which the individual undergoes a complete emotional upheaval at a certain time and place.

Everything in a good Presbyterian reacts negatively to all of that. We don't like to be manipulated: we don't like emotions to rule our reason: we don't care for the superficiality of a campaign which employs bumper stickers and celebrity endorsements. But most of all we feel - and if we are more than casually acquainted with the New Testament - we know, that conversion or rebirth is a process and not an event. Nicodemus, himself, is illustrative. Apparently it began intellectually for him: he came to Jesus with a question. The account includes no mention of an immediate response; the clear inference is that Nicodemus went away from the encounter still wondering, asking, disturbed. Later he was moved to say a good word for Jesus in the council: and finally, in coming forward to claim the crucified body, he made his public commitment.

In the recent edition of Theology Today, Eric Routley writes, "Most of the great conversions were preceded by arguing and protest: Paul, Augustine, Wesley: and those converted did not cease to wrestle once they had been." (Theology Today, April 1977, p.23). And Charles Colson in the book everyone is talking about, Born Again, makes very clear that his conversion story has many chapters and was not a one time event.

Can't we, who stand so proudly in the theologically integrity of the Reformed tradition, say that conversion is always a process? Can't we allow for the validity of the occasional dramatic upheaval, without ignoring the best of our own tradition which is that rebirth is punctuated by many decisions: that for everyone there is a time when a first, faltering step is made, but that the journey takes a lifetime?

I think we can and must. I think we make a serious error when we retreat into the theological labyrinth of our tradition. Christianity is certainly more than an emotional high: but just as certainly it is more than the sum total of its intellectual insights. Again, David Roberts is instructive. He wrote, "At the worst, the Churches have acted as though Christianity could be transmitted by getting people to say 'yes' to dogmas." (op.city. p.69). The sad truth is that no one gets very excited about doctrine except theologians and preachers. No one commits his or her life to a creed. Somewhere between the emotional upheaval model and a lifetime of listening to sermons on the classic doctrines of incarnation and atonement, is the honest position. Finding it and claiming it is, I believe, the most urgent task we face today.

Conversion is the answer to what the New Testament calls sin. It is a process. It is also a changing of the whole person. The revivalistic approach risks changing emotions alone. The intellectual approach aims at the mind. Neither deals very adequately with the whole person.

The story is told of the Barbarian Tribes of Northern Europe who were converted to Christianity at the point of a sword. It was their custom, as they strode into the water to be baptized, to hold their battle axes high above their heads, making certain that these weapons and the life style they represented, were not altered by this magic rite. I like that little vignette, even if it is not true, because it is precisely what continues to happen. We're always holding something out of the water: our wallets and check books for instance; "sure I believe, but that doesn't mean I have to make financial sacrifices, does it?": or our social attitudes; "of course I'm a Christian, but that doesn't mean I have to love everyone, does it?" Conversion means the turning of the whole person, or, to be

consistent metaphorically, the emersion of the whole person. It has to do with the entirety of our personhood: our money, our time, our life goals, our politics, our economics, our relationships.

Elton Trueblood said one time, "...the conversion which is important is not conversion from sheer paganism to nominal Christianity, not conversion from the cold to warm, but conversion from luke-warm to hot, from a mild religion to one in which a person's whole life is taken up and filled and compelled." (Robert Raines, New Life in the Church, p. 27-28).

That, frankly, is the conversion in which I am most intensely interested. We do not live in a culture that is pagan. The early Christian missionaries had to begin, literally, from scratch. Christian missionaries and fraternal workers in some places in the world today, must do the same. But this is a culture born out of a deep rooting in the fundamentals of Christianity, a culture whose institutions bear the marks of that profound influence. The Gospel of Jesus Christ has been a dominant motif in the American experience since the beginning. A recent U.S.News and World Report feature on religion repeated the familiar, and still astounding data: 94% of our population believe in God. 56% regard religion as a "very important" part of their lives.

The conversion which ought to be claiming our attention therefore is not, as Trueblood noted, from paganism - but from nominal Christianity. Or as every study group which ever looked at this or any local church, has observed bluntly: "the evangelistic responsibility of the church begins in its own congregation." We need new members - new Christians: but more than that we need old members to warm up a bit, and to begin to act as if Jesus Christ and His Church really do matter. In his little classic, The Screwtape Letters, C.S.Lewis has the devil discussing a recent convert with his nephew and lieutenant, Wormwood, "In a week or two you will be making him doubt whether the first days of his Christianity were not, perhaps, a little excessive. Talk to him about 'moderation in all things'. If you can once get him to the point of thinking that religion is all very well up to a point; you can feel quite happy about his soul. A moderated religion is as good for us as no religion at all - and more amusing." (p.51).

How? Nicodemus mused about the unlikely image of an old man being born again. And Jesus, in one of the most hauntingly beautiful sentences in the New Testament said, "The wind blows where it will, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes." It is significant that in both Greek and Hebrew "breath" and "wind" and "spirit" is the same word. Jesus was saying, I believe, that, like the wind, the breath or spirit of God moves mysteriously, inconspicuously, to draw men and women to Himself: that conversion, finally, is God's doing, not ours. That means we don't have to push. We don't have to be frantic in our promotion of the Gospel. It means that, in their anxiety about success the evangelists who count up conversions are doing more than our Lord Himself did. He was content, apparently, to present His case with integrity and let God take it from there. I think that is the most important understanding of all. The evangelistic task of the church is to announce the Gospel and invite men and women to discipleship and then give God time and space in which to work. It is not to badger and cajole and argue people into being born again. In fact, if the Gospel record is to be trusted, the result of badgering, cajoling, arguing, manipulating, pleading and frightening are not conversions at all, but simply badgered, cajoled, manipulated, frightened statistics on someone's church roll.

How to do it? I've talked with many people who have been made to feel bad because they don't have a sense of salvation; assaulted verbally by others who can tell the time and place when they were born again, these folks feel inadequate and wonder at times if they are really Christians. The word of Scripture is simple. The wind blows where it will: stand in it: stop worrying about it long enouth to give God an opportunity to touch your life: let yourself go: let God love you.

We are here this morning for as many different reasons as there are different individuals seated in the Sanctuary. Something stirred us once: something once prompted us to ask a question: or something motivated us to get up from where we were sitting and move to a place where we saw the wind blowing. God, I choose to believe, began a conversation with us and something in us responded.

The really important thing is that the conversation continue. God may be trusted. He will keep moving in and out of our lives, pushing us here, prodding us there, calling us up short over here, challenging us to reexamine over there. And when we respond, when our lives continue to change dramatically, or as imperceptably as the growth of a child, we are, in fact, in the midst of conversion.

That is the miracle of grace. That is the Good News of the Gospel, that in Jesus Christ, God can take your life and mine and make something of worth and value and significance.

Whatever happened to conversion? Not a thing. The fact is that God, right now, is working at it - and succeeding.

Amen.

Our Father, we erect so many barriers: walls of pride and selfishness and the status quo. Break them down: draw us to you and to one another, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.